

VZCZCXRO9389  
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DE RUEHCV #2104/01 1951636  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
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FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5499  
INFO RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 6775  
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 5630  
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ PRIORITY 2187  
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RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE PRIORITY 1054  
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY  
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RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 002104

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/10/2031  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ELAB](#) [KDEM](#) [SCUL](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: VENEZUELAN HARASSMENT OF NGOS - UPDATE

REF: A. CARACAS 00339  
[1](#)B. CARACAS 00904  
[1](#)C. CARACAS 01059  
[1](#)D. CARACAS 01779

CARACAS 00002104 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,  
for Reason 1.4(b).

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (C) The impending passage of the International Cooperation Law represents a major step towards Chavista control of Venezuelan NGOs. Even without the law's proposed regulations and limitations on the activities of NGOs, the Chavistas are instilling a high level of apprehension among organizations specializing in democracy and human rights. Numerous incidents over recent months exhibit BRV efforts to exert their influence and threaten NGOs and their members. While many think that both national and international reaction to the law's planned incursion into NGO operations might prevent it from passing, these organizations are far from breathing easily.

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"Encircled by Political Persecution"  
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[1](#)2. (C) The National Assembly (AN) proposed in June the enactment of a new law that would place restrictions on the operations of Venezuelan NGOs, particularly in regards to their acceptance of international funding. (Reftels (B) and (D)). The proposed law would impose a tighter grip on yet another sector of Venezuelan society, joining political restrictions on the media, opposition, private property and the judicial system for political revenge. Citing the danger of "imperialistic" (read: US) influence on Venezuelan society and sabotage of the Bolivarian government (Deputy Saul Ortega, President of the AN's Committee on Foreign Affairs,

even went so far as to imply that some NGOs might act as fronts for illicit activities such as drug trafficking and terrorism), the law would seriously impede international support for democracy and human rights initiatives. It would also result in greater restrictions on the formation and functions of national NGOs. The AN approved the first draft of this law on June 13, and observers believe that the legislature will arrive at a decision by mid-August.

13. (C) With or without the law, the BRV is already harassing Venezuelan NGOs. NGO representatives report specific incidents of harassment directly related to the activities of their respective organizations. Examples of such incidents:

-- The director of the Universidad Central de Venezuela's Human Rights Center told Emboffs he learned recently from a contact within DISIP (Venezuela's security and intelligence police) that he is on a government list of targets of planned "accidents."

-- A human rights defender in Aragua State was assaulted by armed thugs and told to drop a case she had brought on behalf of a local girl who was repeatedly raped by members of her community.

-- Alexandra Belandia, director of Grupo Cambio (see reftel (C)), is the subject of a terrorism investigation for her role in placing paper skeletons throughout the city of Caracas in protest of the killings of three students who were fleeing from a suspicious police checkpoint.

-- A human rights defender in Anzoategui State won a case against five local police officers on charges of murder. Subsequently, he had his car stolen, his house burglarized and has received numerous threatening phone calls.

CARACAS 00002104 002.2 OF 003

-- In May, suspected Chavistas hacked into the website of NGO Paz Activa and posted BRV propaganda. This was shortly before a USAID-funded NGO forum to discuss the impending law in which Paz Activa was one of two NGO organizers.

-- As noted in the 2005 Human Rights Report, Venezuelan Prison Observatory Director Humberto Prado received telephone threats after he announced his solidarity with prisoners engaged in a national hunger strike.

-- Last year, the Caracas Metropolitan Police withdrew the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR)-ordered bodyguards it had provided for COFAVIC director, Liliana Ortega. The IACHR passed a resolution directing the government to reinstitute Ortega's police protection, which was only restored after she defended the IACHR order before a local court.

-- Subsequent to Chavez' public accusations against Sumate (see reftel (A)), representatives of two other NED (National Endowment for Democracy)-funded NGOs, CESAP (Centro al Servicio de Accion Popular) and Accion Campesina (a rural development organization), were publicly accused by members of the National Assembly of treason for having accepted NED funding. The accusations were referred to the judicial system, but only Sumate was formally charged.

-- Late last year, an American lawyer announced on television the names of NED grantees for the second half of 2005. Two of the NGOs, Kape-Kape (an indigenous development group) and Consorcio Justicia (social and legal reform), were subsequently grilled by DISIP; Kape-Kape's interrogation lasted 12 hours. More organizations might have been summoned were it not for the long Christmas break.

-- DISIP extensively questioned the director of Una Ventana a la Libertad, a USAID-funded NGO implementing a human rights education project. They were particularly interested in his

collaboration with the USG and made sure he understood that he and his family were being watched. He continues to receive threatening phone calls and receives IACHR-ordered guard visits only twice a week to monitor his safety.

-- Members of the state government accused the Colegio de Abogados de Lara State of being part of a scheme to finance the opposition. This was due to their ongoing participation in an Embassy program promoting workshops on topics such as freedom of expression and international commerce, and their hosting the local American corner.

-- The director of a preschool in Vargas State, Queriendo a los Ninos, which benefited from a USAID-funded social impact project, was called into Caracas for a contentious three-hour meeting with the national director of SENIFA, the branch of the Ministry of Health that supports day care centers. Although SENIFA threatened to cut off all future government support, the community's strong reaction assured that this did not happen.

-- During a recent USAID meeting with a group of NGOs to discuss programs related to social responsibility, one of the groups (which has been working in low-income neighborhoods for years) pointed out that USG funding has become much more problematic as of late. Members of the community have become afraid to work with these NGOs for fear of possible retaliation.

-- A series of workshops to promote the role of students as facilitators of dialogue (organized by FUNDEP (Fundacion Educando Pais) at the Universidad Central de Venezuela) was subjected to a leafletting campaign. The leaflets included a threat that "participants in the USAID-funded program would be identified and judged by the university community." The students reported that attendance at the workshops was light,

CARACAS 00002104 003.2 OF 003

but that subsequent follow-up activities in a nearby low-income neighborhood - which had active participation by many members of the community, thus making it harder to identify workshop participants - was heavily attended.

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NGOs SPEAK OUT  
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14. (C) In recognition of these and other ongoing incidents of harassment, as well as the increasing danger that the International Cooperation Law presents, the Human Rights Center of Universidad Central de Venezuela hosted a June 30 meeting of local NGOs to denounce the proposed law. Father Luis Ugalde, rector of the Universidad Catolica Andres Bello, challenged the hypocrisy of Chavista rhetoric in regards to the BRV's attitude towards NGOs. He aptly pointed out that efforts to hamper the work of human rights and democracy organizations run contrary to the Constitution and its Bolivarian vision of solidarity and social responsibility. Host and Director of the Human Rights Center, Dr. Hector Faundez, countered allegations that NGOs, as currently regulated, could operate out of view of the BRV and accept money for purposes of funding opposition campaigns. Measures of control already provided for in separate legislation (such as audits and declarations of income) would render such questionable investments rather unlikely.

15. (C) Embossos were pleasantly surprised by the extensive representation present at this event, quelling initial concerns that involvement would be limited to only a few of the more vocal NGOs. The event organizers expressed appreciation to several other foreign Embassies for their support for the event (which in actuality was discreetly funded by USAID) but made a tactical omission of any mention of the USG.

16. (C) In separate meetings, the director of Una Ventana a la

Libertad, a prison reform NGO, told poloff that he was distressed about the effects of government pressure, but that there was also no indication of any NGOs significantly backing down. Rather, he was certain that the work of NGOs would simply become more "clandestino" in nature if the law were to be passed (which, incidently, he did not think would happen). The coordinator for NGO Foro Penal mentioned to poloff that she assumes the proposed law will be enacted, making the next step for NGOs to be to register (as would be required) and then challenge the law under the BRV constitution.

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COMMENT  
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17. (C) The significance of the International Cooperation Law, which may or may not be passed mid-August, lies in its representation of the BRV's continuing efforts to lay a heavy hand on the NGO sector. Passage would create even more hoops through which NGOs would need to jump and would allow for more incursions into those organizations' activities. It would likely make direct USAID funding of NGOs impossible - a serious problem in a country where USAID, even with its small budget, is the major international funder of civil society. While consensus says that the myriad Venezuelan NGOs will continue to fight for their right to carry out business as usual, at least some level of self-censorship is likely to be occurring even now and will increase if the law is approved. However, it does not matter whether or not the BRV sees the law as merely a threat or as a tenable piece of legislation - they do not need codification of harassment in order to effectively intimidate civil society.

BROWNFIELD